

to a sharper point (e.g., a needle), which can then be retracted to expose active electrode(s) 704. Alternatively, the electrodes may be formed around the surface of a tapered distal portion of the shaft (not shown). In either embodiment, the distal end of shaft 702 is delivered through the annulus 710 to the target nucleus pulposus 290, which may be herniated, extruded, non-extruded, or simply swollen. As shown in Fig. 35, high frequency voltage is applied between active electrode(s) 704 and return electrode(s) 706 to heat the surrounding collagen to suitable temperatures for contraction (i.e., typically from about 55°C to about 70°C). As discussed above, this procedure may be accomplished with a monopolar configuration, as well. However, applicant has found that the bipolar configuration shown in Figs. 34-36 provides enhanced control of the high frequency current, which reduces the risk of spinal nerve damage.

2. Please enter the following amended paragraph on page 43, line 12:

As shown in Figs. 35 and 36, once the nucleus pulposus 290 has been sufficiently contracted to retract from impingement on the nervous tissue 720, the probe 700 is removed from the target site. In the representative embodiment, the high frequency voltage is applied between active and return electrode(s) 704, 706 as the probe is withdrawn through the annulus 710. This voltage is sufficient to cause contraction of the collagen fibers within the annulus 710, which allows the annulus 710 to contract around the hole formed by probe 700, thereby improving the healing of this hole. Thus, the probe 700 seals its own passage as it is withdrawn from the disc.

IN THE CLAIMS:

Kindly enter the following amended claims as follows:

32. A method for treating tissue within a patient's spine comprising: